

Robert Curvin Interview: Stanford Gallenter

CURVIN: I have Stanford Gallenter an old dear friend from way back for this interview and I would like to start by asking Stanley to just talk a little bit about your history in this area of Essex County, growing up, where you went to school etc.

GALLENTER: Well I was born in Beth Israel Hospital. My parents had come to Newark from Brooklyn and were in Newark six or seven years when I was born, we lived my entire childhood between south of Lyons Avenue and north of Maple Avenue in that quadrant of Newark until my first year of high school when my family moved to Irvington and I went along and went to Irvington High School.

I went to Maple Avenue School to Chancellor Avenue School, I started Chancellor went to Maple and then came back to Chancellor, we moved a lot within that quadrant that I just described and then went to the Weequahic Annex which was on Hawthorne Avenue, I guess it was called Hawthorne Avenue School. I don't recall but I think I portion or all of it was the Weequahic Annex. I started my second year and Weequahic my family moved so I ended up at Irvington High School and I graduated from Irvington.

My roots were still in Newark and people I knew were so I spent a lot of time back in the home area. We lived on the North End of Irvington, my father had a, among other businesses, had a candy store that was during the war, was, hardly survivable. Everything was short all kinds of sweets and ice cream and candy everything that a candy store might sell was in short supply.

So he did the best he could. I opened the door in the morning while he did some other things. There was a newspaper route that he had, a large route that my brother and he started and then when my brother went to the service in 1940, went to the Navy, I became my father's right hand helper. So I open the store in the morning, I closed it at night, went to school in between.

We had the newspaper route oh, it was still a part of my father's activities so I spent time in the afternoon dealing with the newspaper route so all of that continued until I graduated from Irvington and went to oh, I graduated I was in the four-year program, but I hated it so much that I decided to change my major to a general and get out in three and a half years.

Back in those days they had graduations twice a year so it turned out that evened out with the college, and I got into Newark College of Engineering, I went to for a year from age 17 to 18, and the GI Bill that war had just been over I graduated from Irvington in 45, the war in Europe was just over and my brother was still in the Navy and went on from the European theater to the Pacific. but in 46 it was all over and in September of 46 the GI bill was going to run out, excuse me no that's not right, September 46 yes I guess the GI Bill was going to run out and the only way that my father helped, I had some money and we just about made the tuition at Newark College of Engineering which was very, very small, it was clear that the only way that I was going to be able to go on to school was to get some help, the GI Bill fit very well, I wasn't too overjoyed with engineering in any event and I went into the service.

I joined the army. Went to, after basic training went to Japan into the army of occupation, I was there from December 46 to March of 48 and got out of the GI Bill enough to oh, I had one year of college, it was enough to take me to three more years and one semester of Law School. When I came back I went to Rutgers Arts and Science in Newark, which was in an old Brewery which was on Rector Street, I needed another year to get into the Rutgers Business School which at that time was a five semester school which required two years of college to get in, that was a great time for me I enjoyed myself, felt very much empowered and did quite well. During the middle semester after the fourth semester accounting majors could drop out and get a job for an accounting firm, and do an internship, if you had a certain grade average which I did and it was interesting, but I decided that the most honored people in the at the firm where people in the tax department, and the top people there also have law degrees so I decided that I should probably get a law degree.

So I went back to the fifth semester business school, graduated and the only way I could go to law school was to go to law school at night. Rutgers had a program at the time five nights a week but most of the accounting firms, the big accounting firms wouldn't allow their employees to go on to school because of the requirement during the busy season with working nights and weekends frequently.

One of the largest, after I interviewed with several, one of the largest, a company at the time called P. Mitchel [34:33] has now become several other things, and I went to law school at night and I was an accountant during the day. After my first semester of law school I saw that I would rather be a lawyer than an accountant and I stayed in accounting for exactly, to the day, 3 years. Which is the time it takes to get a CPA certificate, after you go through the exams of course. As a matter of fact, when I went before the Ethics Committee which is part of the process of becoming certified they counted the days, I was one day short according to that count.

I turned why I'm sure oh, they were able to recount and found out that it was just enough. So I went to law school, back in those days New Jersey was the only state union that had two levels of lawyers, a lawyer and an attorney and a counselor. Similar to the English system of counselor and, I forgot the other term, but only the other term could practice in the courts in England. But in New Jersey you had to be a counselor in order to practice in the patent division in the Supreme Court [32:48].

Of course I wanted to be able to practice everywhere so after I took the bar exam, I then took, it required another year of training and ____ argument before the [32:29] patent division in order to become a counselor, I became a counselor the following year. During that time, I started a clerkship, it was a required clerkship at the time also the only state in the union that required it for nine months until you become a lawyer.

I clerked for Weintraub and Stein [32:00] Weintraub being the person who was the chief justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court shortly thereafter. It was a very distinguished firm and it was a great opportunity. I stayed with them during the clerkship time and then got a job as an analyst in the city of Newark on the city council staff.

Apparently the job—I knew Sam Cooper well—the newly-elected councilman, the person that came out of the Ellenstein group machine, I guess some people would call it. As a result of help from him they had just created the new staff function for, the council to serve the city council. Sam decided to make the requirements that you had to both be an attorney and a CPA. It turned out to be the only time that the analysts' requirement was ever fit that description because when I left a year and a quarter later they made it just an accountant, neither CPA nor an attorney was required, and during that time I did some interesting work mostly because I stimulated myself council didn't seem to need an analyst because there were very few requests for information other than political.

So I convinced one of the councilman to review the air pollution ordinance in the city oh, I took on that job to renew the air pollution ordinance among some other things, I have forgotten what they were. But eventually I had to work too hard to do somethings so I left.

I opened a law office with a guy I met who was clerking for a law firm right across the hall from [inaudible 29:31] So we set up an office with two private offices and an outside reception room we practiced separately although we did a lot of things together, we had no money and no clients and no connections.

I convinced the young lady who was a legal secretary to operate as a secretary and stenographer for hire with the theory that she would work for us and we would pay her for the hours that she worked for us. It was unfortunate for her because it didn't work out too well. She didn't make a lot of money, she probably made twice as much as she made when she came with us. But she stayed for a while and maybe she got some good experience, as I said we had no real business connections so we decided that we really have to create our own business so we formed a building company with the theory that we would handle all the legal work and structure it so that people who knew what they were doing would handle the rest of it.

I worked out an arrangement with a girl I used to date who was a friend of mine to provide the financing, she is now part of a couple that is worth about 2.8 billion dollars having built a huge savings alone and selling it to Wachovia. Anyway, there is so much to tell about those things it's very difficult to take the highlights.

CURVIN: Let me stop you just one minute because I'm interested in knowing at what point in this sort of march through your professional life did you get interested in the politics and the social action that's going on in Newark?

GALLENTER: The start of it was, I was very friendly with a guy that I met when I was 15 in Irvington named Norman Schiff who was a couple years older than I was. I took out his sister and I got to know him. I became part of that group although I was the young man out in the group but he was sort of an interesting light for me, he guided me into some paths that I would have never explored before.

He was very much involved with the community, very much involved with the Y on High Street, it was called High Street at the time. He took me to some of the meetings he went to he was quite a leader. And then he got involved in politics and I went along with him and that's when I meant

Sam Cooper, Norm was the campaign manager for Sam Cooper's campaign for Senate counsel and I was everybody's assistant.

That led me into other aspects of politics which I will get back to but about that same time I started getting active in some of the Jewish defense organizations. Principally the American Jewish Congress, Congress had an arm at Department on Law and Social Action which had quite a large committee in Newark made up of mostly lawyers but some others who were interested in civil rights and civil liberties so I became very active in that and as a result got somewhat involved in the open housing laws that New Jersey pioneered. AJC, the commission, was very much involved in promoting that and developing it.

I'm not sure, probably Bob you know better than I do, but I became involved with CORE and I don't exactly remember when that took place but it was about that time. I was involved with core pretty much until the time when CORE decided they didn't want any more people in it that were not African American. I also got involved with you—

CURVIN: Make believe I'm not here [laughs]

GALLENTER: Okay, I got involved with Bob Curvin, who was very much involved in an effort to integrate the trade unions, including sitting down in front of bulldozers and stopping construction.

So there were issues raised, some of which threatened going to jail, the Commission on Law and Social Action helped on that guard to get people out of jail when they went in. There were also demonstrations in front of a number of large companies in an effort to integrate their employment base.

I remember my nephew got himself chained to a fence in Nutley at one of the large pharmaceutical companies, which-- we had some problem getting him out of that what was fairly much a mess. I also remember sitting in the mayor's office in Newark, I forgotten who the mayor was at the time it was probably Addonizio, where we started negotiating with the trade unions, I'm pretty sure Bob was there I'm not sure who else was there but I represented oh, I don't know whether it was CORE or the organization most directly involved but some group probably CORE where we forced the trade unions to negotiate with us.

Their answer to every effort to get African Americans into apprenticeships, was that you need this and that and the other thing and usually it was a recommendation from a member, and there weren't any African American members. Getting a recommendation was probably impossible, or was impossible. It also required high school graduation and many of the African American, and Latin American workers who were interested in getting into an apprenticeships didn't have the high school certificate. So we negotiated and I don't remember the outcome but we accomplished something oh, how much we accomplished I don't know but I think it started integrating those trade unions which were so steeled against any opportunity for African Americans.

During that same, when Addonizio was running for, was about to run for mayor, which Norm I think was his campaign manager, I happened to live in the same apartment house that Norm lived in on Lyons Avenue and I remembered that he brought Addonizio over to my apartment

and we talked about what he wanted to do, and I felt somewhat overwhelmed that they should come to me to ask about how I might be able to help them. And I agreed that I would oh, he was a fairly good Congressman as far as I knew, I of course didn't know what the future held for him but maybe fortunately at that time I got an offer to leave the practice of law and go into a franchising operation as vice president of a fairly active and successful company which I decided to do and that took five or six days a week so there was no possibility of working within Addonizio effort.

After that business went up like a rocket when I was there and turned over the peak and started going down. I decided my future wasn't there anymore and I went back to practice law and when I came back there was an opportunity to get involved with a new organization that was working to change the nature of the democratic party in Essex County which at the time was run by a boss called Democrats For a Good Government, during that period I ran for the assembly in the primary with several others on the Democrats For Good Government ticket, we lost, a year later I ran as the candidate for congress oh, I think it was the 12th congressional district at the time, long since change, and the primary again. I was probably the worst politician that ever came along, we got a third of the vote but mostly because Democrats for Good Government was starting to catch on to make a long story short over the next several years, maybe 10, eventually Democrats for Good Government became the Democratic party in Essex County which I saw from a distance but it was satisfying. Later on Bob I think gave me the opportunity to get involved with Ken Gibson, Bob was very much involved in the Black and Puerto Rican Congress, I don't know if that was the exact name of it but it was something like that, when they selected a candidate to run against Addonizio. I think that was the second time Ken ran oh, I'm not sure under what he ran but he ran twice the first time he lost but forced Addonizio into a runoff the second time he won.

I was more involved in the second time then the first time. He created a kitchen cabinet that we like to think that we had some influence in what he was doing to our chagrin we didn't have much influence.

Bob and I became the co-chairs of the transitioning committee from Addonizio to Gibson and I became pretty much involved in finding a corporation counsel for Ken's Administration. I was putting together this package to present to Ken, the corporation counsel that we were going to suggest was Devois [15:21] who has since become a quiet well-known federal judge who retired I understand what was a partner in one of the major law firms in Newark, outstanding guy, and he and I recruited a number of young men one of whom was oh, his name is eluding me, I can't think of his name but he is now a Times reporter, although he was a very fine lawyer at the time, he worked at his father's Law Firm, his father was on the commission that changed the form of government in Newark, I think he was the chair of the commission actually oh, that changed the form of government to a city council form from a

CURVIN: You're talking about Rodger Lowenstein?

GALLENTER: Yes Rodger Lowenstein, he was one of the men. Several other people loved his caliber. We would have had probably a lot of partners that exceeded the best New York ever had

but I learned on the day of inauguration that Ken had decided to appoint a city magistrate, as the corporation counsel and all of that effort went down the tube, kind of embarrassing when I had to talk to Dick about the change.

I know that Bob and I were kind of disappointed with a lot of things at that time even joked that, I'm not sure that it's much of a joke, but we talked about preparing some signs and protesting Ken's inauguration. Anyway I stayed involved to the extent that I could oh, I don't really think that I had any influence oh, but I still wanted to stay in Newark and I wanted to be involved with Newark.

The opportunities, I think, abounded. The housing business, the real estate business was something that I became familiar with years before and I felt that this would be a good opportunity to get into the housing business in Newark and I formed a company to do low income, housing subsidized, housing using Federal programs, originally called section 236, and eventually change to Section 8 programs. I started building company, a year-and-a-half later President Nixon decided to play some a moratorium on all federal programs that, I'm not sure the category but certainly we fell into it so that effectively killed our efforts although we had three projects in the hopper, we completed one so I became the president of a public company that I ran for a while oh, I think it took a year for the congress to reassert itself, those programs are well established and we were back in business so I closed up my activities and someone else came along to substitute for me as the president of this company and we were back in operation.

What we were doing was rehabilitating units that were there, we weren't building anything new but there were plenty of burned-out buildings or unlivable buildings or buildings that were convertible in New Jersey particularly in Newark that would fit the mold for a substantial rehabilitation so that's what we concentrated in.

Just today my wife and I were driving around Newark, we were helping in the Obama office for the few days that we were here and we pass by, I didn't even recognize the neighborhood because it had been so redeveloped, but there was Locke Street Apartments, which was the conversion of a building, a factory building that was built around the turn of the century right on the Morris Canal which has since many, many years ago has closed up but the factory was still there was empty when we were in the business, that we converted into housing and it's now right smack in the middle of all the redevelopment of the educational institutions in Newark oh, so that was fortunate. We went around to take a look at some of the other projects that we did, some of them were closed up and boarded up, kind of sad, some of them are doing quite well.

CURVIN: As a former Newark lawyer developer what are your observations generally about what Newarkers are calling the recovery? Does it look like it's half done or a quarter done or?

GALLENTER: When Ken was elected, I think in 1970, I got into housing and we created a company that had the capacity eventually to do a lot of city planning we felt that we had to do that because the city wasn't doing it oh, we had a number of plans for various sections of the city that we were interested in. So I technically have a lot of background information, and my wife did a study of the area around Pennsylvania Avenue and the history of it oh, so we had a lot of

information and we were certainly well aware of the conditions of Newark which of course we're kind of dismal.

So if I compare that time with today until we drove around today, I told Bob Curvin what I thought about how slowly the city has been rebuilt because I didn't see, although there are a lot of new buildings downtown, and a lot of new things downtown oh, I didn't think the neighborhoods were getting the kind of treatment that was needed to give some health, some deep seeded health back to the community. Today we drove, my wife was visiting a number of schools to see about getting recruits to get out to vote next week or the week after next oh, and I had an opportunity to see a lot of neighborhoods and there are some neighborhoods that have been very well developed and I are really inspiring to see so my dismal conversation of two days ago with Bob is somewhat ameliorated oh, there is some activities, but there is still so many empty buildings boarded-up buildings unused buildings underutilized buildings desperately poor people wandering around people without jobs obviously young people and although there's some improvement because things look better if I compare it to the time of my childhood.

Newark is a very different place a very tired and very in some cases desperate place. There has been a lot of money that has come into the city, and maybe it takes a lot more to bring the city to a point where it can get some deep-seated viability it seems to me that there is a lot more that can be done it's just very sad that the city has not had the kind of leadership since probably mayor Carlin to give it the momentum to rebuild itself.

If I had my brothers oh, if I had my way to do what I want to, I would tear down every empty building that has been there for 20 or 30 years and open up all the space. We were driving up South Orange Avenue and just as we crossed into Irvington they're obviously big tracks that were opened up by buildings being demolished and as a result, I think that as a result because it would be attractive, some companies like Verizon has built an entire campus on a city block.

There are other areas that have cleaned up, cleaned out the empty buildings, the dilapidated buildings and opened up opportunity for redevelopment that you could only see when the area is clean enough to take a look and it seems to me that it would inspire the city to feel an opportunity to renew itself.

CURVIN: In each of these interviews I've asked the person I'm talking to, to think about, in reflecting on your own experience, as a lawyer and activist someone who really has been deeply concerned about community the life and welfare of people, what would you say if you had a chance to talk to a group of young people today, students for example about what they could contribute to make Newark a better place?

GALLENTER: I guess it's more than a commencement address of work hard, keep your nose to the grindstone, get educated, and everything will be terrific. It takes all of that, certainly all of that and more because of how far behind Newark is but it takes a dedication to this place a feeling that this place belongs to you and you're going to make it better.

There are innumerable ways that that can happen as little as having a decent life for yourself and creating a family that is that makes a contribution as small as it may be to the community just by living happy and fulfilling life to accomplishing great things.

Barack Obama is the kind of light the African Americans in this country, everybody in this country can look to as what you can make out of yourself with the, with as little as he had to start with.

Bob Curvin is another example, and I'm sure there are many, many others. Bob was probably as poor as Barack was poor with a big family I need to do it on your own certainly got support I'm sure from his own siblings, Barak support from his grandparents and his wonderful mother certainly you need support you need a father and a mother and relatives or any combination of those to help when times get to despairing but the opportunities are there I mean if you look around the city and recognize that, take a look at this city and take a look at a city that is vibrant and look at the differences and see what would have to change to make it vibrant their entrepreneurial opportunities on every street there are opportunities to particularly in this city there are so many educational institutions that it's hard not to trip over one there are opportunities to build skills, vocational skills, academic skills, skills that would lead you to the Heights, whatever you would describe as heights so that's what I would tell them.

CURVIN: That's great, thank you Stanley. That is a perfect, perfect ending.